
SCHOOL OF PRAYER

ШКОЛА МОЛИТВА

INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER



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Chapter I: ON PRAYER

PRAYER IS THE ENCOUNTER OF OUR SINFULNESS WITH GOD' S MERCY

"I believe, O Lord, and I confess that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first. "

– From the prayer before Holy Communion

We often speak about the special importance of prayer in our lives—both personal and communal. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that prayer is an encounter between two persons. It is a meeting to which neither of us—nor God Himself—can be forced. If we fairly view our relationship with the Lord as mutual, we will see that God has far more reason to have “complaints ”against each of us than we have against Him.

In order to desire to pray, we must be conscious of this relationship between the Lord and ourselves. We must understand that He is God, that He is King. And we, for our part, should at the very least be seeking His will, even if at the moment we are not yet capable of fulfilling it.

God, on His side, is always awaiting us—but He waits for us to seek Him

personally. Therefore, prayer—ultimately, our encounter with God—cannot be just another routine event in our lives.

If we wish to pray, we must be aware that we are sinners who are in need of God's help, and that we cannot exist without Him. The only thing we can truly offer Him is our desire for Him to receive us.

God has received us in our repentance. He has received us with mercy and love. Only by reflecting deeply on the words of the Gospel of Matthew can we see many instances in which individuals became aware of their sinful condition and relied solely on God's mercy. First, the healing of the leper (Mt 8:1-4). Then the example of the Canaanite woman's daughter, who not only spoke but *cried out*, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (Mt 15:21-28). Or the healing of the two blind men (Mt 9:27-31), who, as we read again, *cried out*, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." Then there are the two blind men of Jericho (Mt 20:29-34), who, upon seeing Jesus, likewise *cried out again*, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" It is their example that gave rise to the Jesus Prayer, because when a Christian says, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," he recognizes, on the one hand, that he stands before God, and on the other, that he is a sinner.

Moreover, if we look at the content of the prayers in our prayer books—and even more so at our own lives—we can easily see that we are, in a way, beggars, for we are constantly coming before the Lord with some request or another, constantly asking something from Him.

It is worth noting that the ripening and formation of us as persons occurs most deeply during times of difficulty and trial—during those moments and under those conditions when we are entirely unable to rely on anything or anyone. It is precisely then that we realize we have no one left to rely on but God. Thus, these life challenges and difficulties are for us a true grace and blessing from God—an opportunity, once again, to realize who we are and who the Lord is for us.

In prayer, we can only gradually draw near to God. It is a time in which we turn to Him step by step. All we can do is return to the Lord in reverence and trembling worship—as far as we are able—and call upon Him to transform us.

Prayer is what gives us the possibility of encountering the Lord. And in encountering Him, we become partakers of His Kingdom. Therefore, prayer enables us to *taste* this Kingdom of God. And only after tasting it do we begin to truly seek and long for it—for one cannot long for what one has never tasted.

In our daily life, we almost always have our own plans, desires, and convictions, and thus are not always ready to surrender ourselves into God's hands. We must be like an object: wherever the master places it, there it remains. We must entrust ourselves into God's hands and allow the Lord to guide us, to act freely through each one of us. This is one of the most important things we must come to understand and learn: yielding and completely entrusting ourselves into the hands of the Lord.

Most likely, the difficulty in our prayer lies in the fact that, at the beginning of our practice, we wanted—so to speak—to *seize* God by force through our own personal resolutions, efforts, and exertions. But when, time and again, these efforts failed, we eventually became discouraged by them—and ultimately, discouraged in personal prayer itself. If we do not come to grasp our own weakness and helplessness, and if we do not consciously understand that we are truly sinners in need of God's help, then we will not be able to take steps forward in prayer. Otherwise, no matter whose exhortations or encouragements we hear, or how many personal efforts we make, they will accomplish nothing by themselves when it comes to our personal prayer.

PRIORITIES IN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN

The main thing in each of our lives is to do the will of God. This is the beginning and end of everything. God's will already exists—we only need to come to know it. For this, of course, we need prayer, seeking, and time. Each of us is aware that we must fully and entirely do God's will and entrust ourselves completely to Him. And when the time comes, the Lord will call us to some kind of service or activity. What matters most is to be with God.

Here it is fitting to recall the well-known example from the Gospel of Martha and Mary. I believe Martha's mistake was that she began to serve the Lord “of

her own will.” Mary, however, “chose the better part” because she waited at the feet of Christ to receive an answer about what *His* will for her was.

Christian life had one purpose: the salvation of the soul. The Christian sought first the Kingdom of Heaven. And the more he was freed through prayer from the “old man,” the more he was ready to allow the image of God to be made manifest in him. Only then was it no longer he, but rather the Lord working through him in full measure to carry out the mission of service to others and to the world—because outwardly was revealed that which the person lived by inwardly, what filled their soul. Therefore, the goal of Christian life is not merely in external activity (no matter how noble it may be), but in an inner drawing near to God. And this is primary—everything else is secondary.

The Christian always seeks only God in his life. And having found Him, he becomes capable of giving Him and His love to all whom he meets along the journey of life. Then we become the image of God—we become His “living icon” here on earth. And we become able to discern what God expects and desires from us in particular circumstances—what kind of service or activity He is calling us to.

PRAYER IS DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

If we open the Catechism, we will see that it says: prayer is a conversation with God.

There are two major problems in our prayers. First, we all carry various stereotypes about God—each person has his own. We often say of people: “I know him” or “I know her.” But we knew that person at a certain time, under certain circumstances, and now they have changed—and so have we. The same applies when we speak of God: we hold on to a certain image of Him that we once acquired, heard about, or read. This is a serious issue. It doesn’t mean that all stereotypes are bad; each of us can have our own personal, subjective experience. However, every authentic encounter with God reveals something new about Him. You may know someone for years and suddenly discover a completely new side of them. A similar parallel applies here.

I come to God with what I already know about Him, with my prior experience, my understanding of who He is—but I must be ready for Him to reveal Himself in a new way, to show me something unique that I had not previously been aware of.

When it comes to ourselves, the problem is even more difficult. Very often in this world we play different roles: one at home, another at school, another with friends, yet another on Facebook. We present ourselves differently in every setting. When we come before God, we might ask: in which role should I stand before Him? Where is my true “self”? We can have so many roles that we become completely lost, hidden beneath the many masks we wear.

That is why it is not easy to come before God just as we are. I believe this is the most important thing—to stand before God in truth. Look at who your true friends are. They are the ones before whom you do not play roles or wear masks, the ones you feel at ease with, with whom you have genuine relationships. Those are the ones with whom you don’t feel the need to posture or pretend.

So it is before God: we must come in truth—with our pain, our victories, our failures—and then, and only then, will that encounter truly take place.

PRAYER IS A CONVERSATION

If someone asks us what prayer is, each person will give a different answer, because we all have different experiences of prayer. But to generalize: prayer is an encounter—an encounter with God. In our meetings with other people, the most important part is the conversation. And prayer is a conversation with God.

So when we speak of prayer, we must ask ourselves: do I really speak with God? Is my prayer truly a time of conversation with the Lord? And what is a conversation? A conversation is not a monologue.

Sometimes our prayer turns into something we’ve memorized or read off quickly and mechanically, but that is not true prayer. That may be a mantra, a tradition, or a custom—but it is not a real conversation with God. What are the two essential elements of a conversation? Speaking and listening.

First, I would like to speak about listening. We do not know how to listen. Look at your conversations with other people. We often can't even wait for someone to finish speaking—we're already shaking with eagerness to say our part. Why do we interrupt? Because we are not ready to truly listen to the other person. In fact, our conversations are often more like monologues: we want to vent, to say something, to make our point, but we're not truly ready to hear what the other person has to say.

That is why it is so important to observe ourselves—to pay attention to how we speak with others. We will likely notice that what we are doing isn't real conversation. We just want to talk, to be heard, to convince someone of something. We don't listen to others!

During the Divine Services, we often hear the words: "*Let us be attentive.*" In the same way, we must be very attentive in how we speak with others—to hear what they are really trying to tell us, to hear what is being communicated.

And so it is with prayer. Prayer, too, is a conversation—a conversation with God. And in prayer, it is extremely important to *listen*—to hear what God wants to say to us. Not only should we say something to Him, but we should also listen to Him. Above all, when we come to prayer, it is important simply to sit in silence before God—to become aware of who the Lord is: the almighty Creator of all things visible and invisible, the One who gave me existence and sustains me in it, the One who has borne with me until now and loves me continually. Other thoughts may arise within us—but what matters most is to sit in silence and listen to the Lord.

Moreover, when we pray and recite various prayers from the *Molitvoslov* or prayer book—whether Vespers or Matins—it is important to listen, because God always wants to say something to us. With great love for each of us, God wants to speak, and He *has* something to say. If only we would be willing to hear it.

Thus, in prayer—in this conversation with God—it is very important to listen to the Lord, to hear Him. We recall those most important words from the Old Testament: "*Hear, O Israel.*" So in our conversations with people, and even more so in our conversation with God, it is essential to listen.

But a conversation is also an opportunity to say something. We know there are people who remain silent during conversation. That can make us uncomfortable; we try to stir them so they' ll say something. I think God also wants us to say something to Him in prayer.

Of course, it is important to read certain prayers—because those are experiences of God lived by others. And those individuals preserved their experience by writing it down in prayer. So when we read such prayers, we are able to draw from their experience of God and make it our own.

Still, it is also very important to speak to God ourselves. We can always say something to Him. Just like when we learn another language: at first, we speak individual words, then we connect them into phrases, and eventually, those phrases become smooth and natural. In the same way, we must say something to God. Sometimes it may be just a single word. Sometimes we might say, “God, this hurts.” We can tell Him that someone is upsetting us. Or we can speak the words of Jesus Christ: “Father, take this cup from me.” What is important here is to remain authentic before God—not to play a role. And yet we play so many roles in life.

That is why God wants to hear what I truly want to say to Him, what I want to express to Him, what is truly important to me—whether it is a blessing for the day ahead, or a request for God's presence in today's meetings, or a plea for His light in a particular life situation. Perhaps I don't have the solution, the answer to a question, or I am going through a crisis—but God has the solutions and the answers for everything.

In this way, we *do* have something to say to God—and we *should* speak with Him.

So then, prayer is a conversation with God, in which the Lord says something to me, and I say something to Him.

PRAYER - THE MEETING OF TWO PERSONS

Prayer is very important in the Christian life. It is also a duty to which the Lord calls every Christian. That is why it is essential to understand what

prayer truly is for us. Let us try to highlight just the fundamental things about prayer.

First and foremost, in my view, prayer is a meeting between two persons. And this meeting either takes place—or it does not. It is a kind of meeting that cannot be forced on anyone. And when we speak about our relationship with God, our encounters with Him, we should recognize that it is not we who have cause for complaint toward God, but rather God who could have far greater cause for complaint against us in regard to these encounters.

How much are these “encounters” truly encounters for us? How much do we long to meet God—and do we truly meet Him, rather than expecting something else?

In order to understand how we ought to come to this encounter with God, we must acknowledge our condition after original sin. We must understand that we have a sinful nature, a fallen condition, and that God is our Master—for He has redeemed us from the slavery of sin. He is our Lord, our Sovereign, and we are His servants—sinners who seek Him and in this way come to Him.

Often it may happen that we are not ready or able to seek God, not capable of knowing or fulfilling His will. But the most important thing is that we *desire* it. If there is desire and longing, all else will follow. According to our desire, God immediately gives us what we need—if it is truly good for us.

Prayer must not be just one more event in our daily schedule. It must be something essential for us. When we come to the Lord, we must be firmly convinced that God will receive us in whatever condition we are in. Surely, none of us has ever gone to confession and been told by the priest, “Your sins cannot be forgiven. You are such a great sinner that God has exhausted His forgiveness toward you.” When we approach the sacrament of penance, we are always certain that God will forgive us. But must God forgive us? That is a rhetorical question. I will go even further: of course not. Forgiveness is offered by someone who has been offended. But God always loves us—so He cannot forgive in the same way we might think—because He has never stopped loving us.

Now consider how we approach prayer: are we confident that God hears us and will give us what we ask for? More often, when we turn to God with our

weaknesses, faults, sins, and failures, we already come armed with reasons why He “won’ t” help us. But God never asked us to justify Him. He does not need defense attorneys to protect Him. God is simply waiting for our faith.

We have often read in the Gospels how people became aware of their sinful condition and trusted only in God’s mercy. In the end, our prayers mostly consist of various petitions to the Lord. We are, in a sense, beggars—constantly asking God for something, constantly expecting something from Him.

I would also like to draw attention to this: very often, we grow and are formed as persons in the midst of difficult and challenging life situations. It does not matter where these trials come from—whether from external circumstances, people, or internal struggles, crises, breakdowns, and discouragements. Each of us has experienced times when we had no support to lean on. But that is a *very good* condition for spiritual growth. For it is precisely then that we begin to recognize and understand that we can no longer rely on anyone or anything—*not even ourselves*—but only on God.

All of our past achievements, experiences, personal strategies, and prayer rules that may have helped us spiritually in the past now seem powerless. Nothing helps—neither Confession, nor the Rosary, nor prostrations—nothing that used to sustain us before. And yet, in such moments, God helps us most strongly so that we may pass through them.

We also see this special experience in the lives of the saints. Is this not what is called the *dark night*? Rarely does God allow a true dark night, but He does permit a kind of obscurity. Why? Precisely because even saints were human. And they too needed to realize their helplessness and powerlessness, and learn to rely on God alone.

So when troubles, difficulties, failures, and falls come into your life—be profoundly grateful to God for them. They are a great blessing, a great grace, and a sign of the Lord’ s love for you. Through them, God gives you a valuable opportunity to once again realize who *you* are—and who *He* is.

A certain monk (and monks are always striving for something) had an intense desire to learn perfect prayer. He went around seeking instruction from

various elders, asking each of them for advice and to share their experience of prayer. And although he sincerely listened to the words of the elders, they somehow did not speak to his heart—they did not touch him deeply.

One day, as the monk was returning from a hermit who lived in the forest, it was already very late. Although he hesitated about whether to go back or not, he decided to return to his monastery. But night overtook him on the way. I don't know if any of you have ever had the chance to be in the forest in the evening or at night. You know—it's not the most pleasant feeling: darkness, and then something rustles somewhere, a bird sings, an owl hoots, a wolf howls, a tree creaks—it gets eerie. The forest at night truly comes alive; the animals begin to move about.

The poor man was so afraid that he climbed up a tree, thinking he would wait out the night there and no one would find him. He climbed all the way to the top of the tree, until he realized there was nowhere else to go. He couldn't climb to heaven—the tree wasn't that tall—and he was afraid to move in case the top broke off.

There he sat, trembling with fear, for an hour, two... Eventually, a person gets tired of doing the same thing—even trembling. You need to do something else. And that forest became more and more alive as it neared midnight. Wherever he looked—everything was moving. Then he realized he had to do something: *"I'm a monk, I have the Lord, my Defender—I can pray to overcome this fear."* And so he began to pray.

He prayed so fervently that many years later, when he himself had become an elder and young monks came to him asking how he had learned to pray, he would tell them: "It was fear in the forest at night that taught me how to pray." Perhaps difficulties and troubles have also come into our lives—but do not be disturbed: they will teach us how to pray, because on our own we are often not too eager to pray.

When we approach God in prayer, we must come gradually, with reverence and awe. Sometimes we come to God too easily and begin to pray without proper respect for Him. So we must approach with a sense of who we are and before

Whom we stand. This already gives us the opportunity to change. And further—we must fervently ask God to transform us.

In prayer, we also partake of God. Today I would say even more: every encounter with God is a kind of communion. As the saying goes among the people: *“Taste comes only while eating.”* In the same way, the taste of prayer comes only when we begin to savor it. You see, this is why the Church so highly honors the first martyrs. They were the first whom the Church proclaimed as saints, because they had so deeply “tasted” life with God that they desired nothing else. You could not drag them away from God—neither by their legs nor arms, not by any force—not even if you cut off their heads. They had tasted God so profoundly that they would never renounce Him.

So too with us—when we come to taste what prayer truly is, no one will need to force or pressure us to pray. Our problem is that we say words in our personal or communal prayers each day that acknowledge our sinfulness and weakness, yet we do not even realize what we are saying, often for years on end. That is why it is important to reflect on the texts of our prayers. Even if we have prayed them for a long time, we must reread them and meditate on their words in our moments of quiet.

When we approach prayer, we must feel who we are and Who God is—our sinfulness and His majesty. We must recall the words of Jesus Christ spoken to the Apostle Paul: *“My power is made perfect in weakness”* (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). What does this mean? It does not mean that we are weak and that God merely shows His power because of how weak and sinful we are. That’s not the point.

We have all at least imagined how a sailboat moves. The sail itself is very delicate. I don’t know what kind of fabric it’s made from, but it is very supple. And when the wind fills it, it sets in motion the entire great ship. Perhaps there are fewer of them now, but earlier nearly all ships had sails. Picture those small, delicate sails hoisted on the masts—and that massive vessel. In the same way, when the Lord speaks of human weakness, He means that we should be like those supple sails, which God can freely set in motion.

One ascetic said: *“Be like a statue: stand where you are placed.”* Another said: *“Be like an object: lie where you are laid.”* I would say: *“Be like a*

ball: go where you are kicked.” Though, admittedly, it’s not great to be kicked around. All of us are quite weak, fragile, and feeble—but by God’s strength, by the breath of the Holy Spirit, we are capable of great things.

Another difficulty in our prayer life lies in this: at the beginning of our journey in prayer, we often want—to speak—to seize God by force. We force ourselves, take on resolutions, impose rules, and gather all sorts of intentions for prayer. But when those resolutions become tiresome, or when our efforts fail, we often get discouraged: *“How long do I have to keep pushing this prayer forward?”*

Thus we must again become aware: we are sinners who need God’s help.

And I would add this: every encounter with God is a kind of communion. In prayer, we also partake of God, we become communicants of Him. Of course, as we have already said, we partake in a special way through His Body and Blood, but also through His Word.

LOVE FOR GOD LEADS TO PRAYER

We can observe that when we love someone, we devote more time to that person, seeking opportunities to be with them. In the same way, when we feel God’s love, we cannot help but respond to it. When we experience that God loves us, we begin to understand how precious we are in His eyes, and therefore we cannot help but show our own love in return.

Prayer is the awareness of how much God loves us. And thus, we wish to respond to Him with reciprocity, to be with God, to express our gratitude to Him.

Reverence is not only a matter of love, but also of awe and fear. When we love our parents or friends, we are afraid to hurt them. That fear expresses itself in mercy and goodness.

In speaking about God, we will repeatedly express reverence—that is, love and awe. Whoever possesses fear of God will inevitably express love toward Him, and that overflows into prayer. For prayer is the place where we meet God with deep gratitude for His boundless love toward each of us at every moment of our lives.

PRAYER AND DAILY LIFE

Living a Christian life and often facing our own failures and mistakes, we sometimes say: “So many days, months, or years have passed and it feels as if I’ve achieved nothing. Was all this time wasted, useless, without purpose?..” Of course, we must clearly know and understand the purpose of our life. A generic approach would be too simplistic, especially if we acknowledge the reality of eternity, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the afterlife. Then surely the true goal must lie there, not merely here.

All of us, it seems, know this well. We are aware of it, and to a greater or lesser degree, at various stages of our lives, we try to walk toward that goal. We understand that everything in our lives is a tool meant to lead us to this goal—to God, to eternal life, and to the Kingdom of Heaven.

One might think—what could be more important? Look toward Heaven, seek God, seek the Kingdom of Heaven, take steps in that direction. It sounds so clear, simple, and concrete. However, there remains a valid objection: “Still, something needs to be done.” Of course, we must act. I have said many times that we must do what the circumstances require of us, and believe without doubt that the task we are carrying out is exactly what God desires of us.

It would be a great mistake to think that the Lord requires some extraordinary deeds. Not at all. The Lord wants us to live according to the Gospel and the commandments of God. And the more we contemplate such a life—what should we do to be saved—the more our thoughts become entangled, and we run into a dead end. The best course is to accept humbly and with gratitude whatever the Lord sends us through our circumstances, to entrust ourselves into God’s hands, and to pray that He arranges everything for us as He knows to be best. We should always, in fulfilling our duties, understand that every small task should be done as if for God Himself.

There are no greater or lesser tasks—every duty is important to the Lord. The value of our actions is not measured by the prominence or uniqueness of the mission entrusted to us, but by our inner disposition and attitude toward what has been entrusted to us, treating each task as something pleasing to God. We must be convinced that what we are doing is exactly what the Lord asks of us.

Nothing happens by chance, no circumstance occurs on its own. Behind everything that enters our lives stands the Lord. Every event that happens in our life is permitted by God. In each event, He comes to meet us. And when we are firmly convinced of this, every moment, every task or duty will bring us peace and tranquility, because we will have a deep understanding that in every deed we can serve God—and in every deed we can encounter God.

Typically, we are ready to accept God, His will, to embrace all people, to wrap the whole world in our prayer, care, and concern. Yet, there is a serious flaw in such a worldview: we often fail to see and accept what is right before our eyes. We must look at what life is sending us. And only by doing so will we be able to move forward. Because of our grand worldview, we are often unable to engage with the real situations that enter our lives. We are always preoccupied with something abstract or distant.

Researchers conducted a study asking a very interesting question: “Do people feel happy?” At the end of the survey, they were surprised to find that most people fell into two groups: one group said they used to feel happy, and the other thought they would be happy in the future. What do you think—who were the people in that first group? Men, women, monks, nuns, lay people?.. It doesn’ t matter. Elderly people usually tell stories of how everything used to be better, almost ideal, how things were orderly back then, and how life used to be easier... Younger people mostly look forward to how beautiful life will be *someday*, when all the current difficulties end, when those “blessed times” finally come and everything changes. Everyone has their own idea of what exactly is supposed to change. And that’ s the problem of many people: they are not taught to live in the present reality. They live either in what used to be or in what might one day be.

When we speak of our lives and responsibilities, we must learn to do everything conscientiously, so that our tasks, duties, and daily cares are not simply burdens to us, as we often perceive them. These are not just problems we are forced to deal with. It is essential that we begin to see them as instruments and opportunities for our sanctification and for our encounter with God.

And the foundation for this, I emphasize once again, must be the awareness that nothing ever happens outside the will of God. Not a hair falls from our head without the Father's will. Everything is rooted in the love of God. Everything in our life unfolds according to His great Providence and plan—a plan centered on the sanctification and salvation of each one of us.

I don't know if any of you have seen how people work on an assembly line. It doesn't matter where it is—assembling electrical devices, or crafting wooden items—each person stands and performs his or her part, right? Each one does a single task. So too is our life: a vast assembly line, where the Lord leads us through various circumstances. In some situations, we need to be “warmed up” a little, in others “chilled,” in others we must be “dusted,” or “stretched,” or even “flattened.” It's like working with precious stones. When a raw diamond is being processed to become a polished gem—it must be shaped and refined.

Each of us is a diamond—that's true—but to become such, the raw stone must be carefully polished on many sides. And do you know that a diamond can only be polished by another diamond? Something strong, hard, and unyielding. Each of us is a diamond, and to become one, we must endure some friction with others—and with life itself.

This is the assembly line of our life, where each person fulfills their small role. Whatever duties we fulfill, whatever we do—we must always remember that everything has been given to us by God. And that all we have from God is not given to us *just because*, as we often imagine, but rather it is all given for our sanctification. We must see that God is present behind our daily obligations. We must learn to recognize that God wants to sanctify us through every single event. Every person and every circumstance is an instrument through which God sanctifies us. And so, there is no situation or person in the world through whom God cannot work sanctification.

Quite often it happens that people and circumstances—without even realizing it themselves—act together. God acts through them. Do you recall how often in the Old Testament, when the Israelites were unfaithful to God, some scourge or punishment arose? That was how God had to bring them to their senses, to make

them reflect on their lives. So the issue is not in *who* does what, *who* says what, *who* acts, but rather in the fact that through each situation, each event, and each person, God desires to sanctify me.

We must understand the reason we often fail to be sanctified by our daily tasks and duties.

A young disciple once came, as is common in the East, to a spiritual elder. This young man longed to attain a life in God and wanted to overcome his passions and vices. He had his struggles, but he was a zealous soul and kept asking the elder questions. The elder loved people and especially enjoyed helping young people, so he always made time for them.

And so, without even realizing it, they ended up talking the entire evening and into the night. In the morning, the poor young disciple came to his senses, suddenly worried—they had been talking and talking. He thought to himself, “We should have at least prayed a little instead of talking so much.” Feeling guilty for having spent the whole night in conversation instead of in prayer, and worried he had disturbed the elder’s prayer rule and routine, he said to him, “Father, perhaps now, at least, we could say a short prayer together?..”

And the elder replied: “And what do you think we’ ve been doing all night?”

So let us ask ourselves: How do we perceive what life brings us? We often fail to become sanctified by our daily affairs because we do not accept these matters as worthy and good instruments for our sanctification. We don’ t know how to accept them.

Rather, these daily affairs end up materializing us—when we focus on them only at the physical level, when we are absorbed by them and forget that God is behind them. And if God is behind them, then they also carry a spiritual meaning.

We cannot fully accept that our labor and duties are sent to us by God for our sanctification. Whatever we do, we tend to see it only as a burden we are forced to carry out—not as an opportunity to be saved.

There was a monk who did not want to be the superior of a monastic community. He didn't want to govern other monks—it wasn't always easy. And he told his spiritual father: "You know, let those who want to lead go ahead—I no longer want this." And the spiritual father looked at him and said: "You know, if you remain just a simple hieromonk, that will not be the place of your salvation. God will not save you there. God will save you in the role of superior."

Then the monk replied: "Lord, if this is how You want to save me, then I accept it." If we can say that God is absent from a certain place, then we are godless, because if our God is not there, then there is another god. And if there is another god, then there are many gods. It is very important for us to be able to accept everything that life brings us—not to reject it. Because often, in rejecting these things, we reject God's opportunity to sanctify us.

Again, let us recall why people live either in the past or in the future, when in fact, we can live only in the present. It is only in the present moment that we can meet God. And in each moment of my life—whether sweet or painful—it is precisely in that moment, in that event, in those duties, whether during a mystical experience or during a crisis, that God comes to me.

And when we are able to recognize our problems, our falls, our weaknesses, yet still see God behind all of this, as I've already said, we will inevitably be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. Therefore, we must fulfill our duties with love. Because when we accept them with love, as from God, then we are accepting God Himself with His will. But if we do not accept them, we are not accepting God; we are distancing ourselves from Him, because we see only what burdens us.

Do you understand now why so many things disturb us, irritate us, why we judge, do not accept, or criticize them? Because we see things as separate—we see duties separately, circumstances separately—we see them in isolation, and do not see God behind them. But once again I say, nothing happens by itself; in all things, the Lord comes to us.

We often speak about love—love for God and love for neighbor. Let us be honest with ourselves: how often do we actually possess this love? Sometimes we try

to force it out of ourselves, we make ourselves love, but we cannot. Because before we can embrace someone with love, we must first let go of the judgment and prejudice we hold toward that person.

Why do we feel a lack of love for ourselves? Because we are not ready to accept ourselves as we are. To accept does not mean to agree, but to acknowledge reality, to recognize all our strengths and weaknesses. Accepting ourselves or others builds a crucial foundation for showing love to ourselves or others. Without acceptance of someone or something, we should not speak of love at all.

First and foremost, we need simply to accept—to acknowledge—a person within their circumstances. The Lord tells us that no worry is good. The Lord tells us that today's troubles are enough for today (cf. Matthew 6:25-34). This means that we must live in every moment of our lives. God acts perfectly, because He is perfect in every moment of our life. And so, we can meet Him perfectly in any circumstances.

And God always reveals Himself through love. Let us not flee from God's love into the past or the future. When we are unfaithful in fulfilling our duties, they often do not bring us closer to God, because we lack the awareness that we are doing them for Him. Then, whatever we do will be futile and empty. But the Lord desires to come to us and be with us in every circumstance. He is present and He comes.

Therefore, receive every place, yourself, and the circumstances around you as the best that God could give for your sanctification and salvation. The place where we now are is the place where God wants to save us. And let us carry out everything as though it were entrusted to us by God Himself. And when you do all of this with reverence and fear of God, it will always keep your attention fixed on God, who is present everywhere and fills all things. Let us not flee from God's love into the past or the future. When we are not faithful in fulfilling our duties, they often do not bring us closer to God, because we lack the awareness that we are doing them for Him. Then, whatever we do will be in vain and empty. But the Lord desires to come to us and be with us in any circumstance. He is present and He comes.

Therefore, receive each place you find yourself in, yourself, and the circumstances around you as the very best that God could have given for your sanctification and salvation. The place where we are now is the place where God wants to save us. And let us do all things as if entrusted to us by God Himself. And when you do all this with reverence and awe, with fear of God, it will always keep your attention fixed on God, who is present everywhere and fills all things.

GOD IS LIGHT

God, whom we encounter in prayer, is Light-Light that allows us to discern what is truly good for us. Each of us has, at times, been firmly convinced that something was good for us, only to later realize that our conviction was completely mistaken and that we had made poor decisions. In time, we come to see that what we thought was a great good, useful and important for us, in fact turned out to be harmful—harmful to our spiritual life, to our personal choices, and to our relationships with others. And very often, the things we had labeled as “bad” eventually turned out for our good. Once again, Ukrainians wisely say: “There is no evil that does not turn into good.”

But the problem lies in the fact that we cannot simply endure hardship while thinking, *“God is punishing me so I’ ll learn how to live better.”* No. A crisis is a sign from God. It is true that sometimes God must take a firmer hand with us. One of the Fathers says that when God cannot draw us to Himself with sweetness, He drives us with bitterness. Let us not provoke God, so that He need not drive us. And let us not complain when crises or problems come.

Looking at our prayer life, we should see that the problem often begins with us. I often realize that God is like a good housewife, who, even if she becomes distracted or starts talking on the phone and oversalts the soup, still finds a way to fix it—because it would be a shame to throw it out. Or if she’ s ironing and her naturally talkative nature leads her to scorch the clothing, she’ ll find a way to mend it so it doesn’ t go to waste. In the

same way, God can take our sins, our difficulties, and our faults and still bring something out of them.

But is this really necessary? Wouldn't it be better to just cook a good soup from the start? Was it really necessary to burn a hole in new clothing only to figure out later how to patch it up so it doesn't show? I think not. That's why we need prayer in our lives—to learn how to make right choices from the beginning. Too often we begin something, only to abandon it later upon realizing that it was not according to God's will or blessing.

We may take on yet another task, impose yet more obligations upon ourselves, only to later shift again to something else. Or we read a book and resolve to change ourselves. But how many times have we tried to change ourselves under the influence of a book—and what have we really accomplished? This testifies to the instability of our life in God, in the Spirit.

Of course, we ought to draw upon the prayerful experiences of others—especially those the Church honors as saints—but prayer remains a meeting of two persons: the person and God. Therefore, to personally know God and to experience Him can happen only in prayer. Sometimes we try with all our own efforts and diligence to carry out various tasks and responsibilities. Women are usually more persevering in this than men. But often we keep pushing and pushing, only to eventually give up—realizing that our decision arose either from our own overthinking, from stereotypes, or from the influence of a priest's homily, yet we never actually discussed it with God in prayer.

A major problem of the modern generation is the concept of responsibility. Today's person does not want to be responsible for anything. People shift away any chance of bearing responsibility under the pretext that they are not yet mature or do not yet understand many things.

We live in post-Soviet times. In the past, people were constantly trained to be irresponsible. The Communist Party, the leader, made all the decisions for them. A person was just a cog in the system. The consequences of this are clearly visible in the Church today, where we often encounter difficulties encouraging the faithful to take responsibility for various initiatives in our communities—though they make up 99.9% of the Church.

The most basic form of responsibility is this: I am a Christian, and therefore I cannot afford to neglect prayer, for that would be to neglect an encounter with God. I would say that whoever guards their prayer life, cares for it, and puts it first—everything else will fall into place. If God and prayer come first, then everything else immediately assumes its proper order.

Let me remind you—and this needs to be repeated to ourselves ten times a day: “Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven.” But here I would emphasize the second part: “And all these things shall be added unto you.”

So let us seek first the Kingdom, let us seek the King—God—and all the rest the Lord will provide. Let us ask ourselves: is prayer important in our life? Do we think about it constantly, so that at the slightest opportunity we begin to pray, or read the Holy Scriptures? This reveals whether we are thinking about God.

In personal prayer, we encounter God. And in communal prayer, we come together to glorify the God whom we have already encountered in personal prayer. Therefore, the difficulties we face before communal prayer are rooted in our personal relationship with God. Logically, if we have not encountered Him in personal prayer, then how can we praise Him with one voice in communal prayer?

God never leaves our petitions unanswered. To everything we say to Him, He responds—but not at the time we want, rather when He deems it appropriate. God’s ways, God’s paths, God’s plans are not our own ways (see Isa. 55:8). As the saying goes: “Man proposes, but God disposes.”

So let us bring to God in our prayer everything that we have. Let us remember the time when four people brought their friend to Jesus Christ. These were true friends. Naturally, as always, Jesus was surrounded by thousands of people, so it was impossible to get through with a stretcher. These men climbed up onto the roof—perhaps someone let them up because they had a good acquaintance. So they reached the rooftop; in the East, roofs are flat, since there is not as much rain or snow as in our regions. These friends acted very wisely—they saw that they couldn’t get in through the door, so they looked for another way to reach Jesus. Therefore, they dismantled the roof and lowered their friend on the stretcher inside. And the Lord healed him. What

strikes me most in this passage is that Jesus says it was not by the faith of the sick man, but by the faith of his friends, that the healing took place. They took him and brought him.

Likewise, we can take anything or anyone in prayer and “bring” them to God. With our prayer, though we may sometimes think we are burdening God, we are not. He knows better than we do what is happening to us, what we need, and what troubles us. Let us not think that we know our problems and intentions, and that by praying we are just sending some sort of SMS or email to God so that He will find out. No, God already knows, even before we tell Him. Our task is to bring the matter before God and to stand before Him not as the righteous or as sinners, but just as we are. For God wants to deal with real persons, not the masks we present.

Let us remember how Christ Himself prayed: “Father, take this cup away from Me...” In the same way, we should be honest in our prayer and express our true feelings and desires. Jesus Christ, in addition to being true God, was also true man—a God-man. And as a man, He felt pain. Let us not think that Christ always had to show Himself as a hero. His human nature was revealed in His prayer. And just as Christ then said, “Father, take this cup away from Me” (cf. Luke 22:42), so we too have the right to say, “Father, take away this situation or this person, because I cannot endure it. I will try once more, but beyond that I don’ t know what will happen to me or to them.” We can say that to God—because it is honest. That is what we are truly experiencing. And His will is to give or not to give what we ask, because only He knows what is truly good for us.

Let us not carry our problems around inside ourselves—let us hand them over to God. Let us share them with God, let us share our “treasures” that we have gathered; let us give them to Him, not cling to them. We not only have the right, but the obligation to tell God about the various circumstances in our lives that are difficult for us—but always ending with: “Thy will be done, not mine.” For only God knows what is truly good for us.

Prayer is the most important duty in our monastic life. We must give thanks to the Lord. Let us remember from the Gospel how the Lord “had grievances”

against those who did not give thanks when He healed them. But are we aware of what we should be grateful to God for? Do we understand who we might have become if we had had different parents, if we had grown up in other circumstances, if God had not sent us the people who helped us along life's journey, if not for a book we happened to read just in time, which God sent our way? How much thanksgiving should we bring to God for everything? Therefore, this work of God—our prayer—cannot be replaced by anything. We must become aware: everything that is most essential for us is found in God. Therefore, let us always seek opportunities to be in His company.

I recall reading the life of St. Josaphat—and those who described him point out that he owed much of his spiritual formation to other people with whom he associated. As the saying goes, “The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.” What a great privilege it is to be in the company of God Himself, to be in close relationship with Him, to have such a friend as He—because when things are difficult, we can always turn to our friends.

We constantly, in some way, maintain friendships with others—not just when we need their help or wish to involve them in solving some problem. For if we communicate with someone only when we need something, that is not real friendship, and few would wish to be friends with us under such conditions. It is the same with God: either He is our friend—so we constantly seek His company because we find joy in being with Him—or we are merely seeking our own benefit. In that case, God becomes, as is often said, nothing more than a place where we can “order” or request something.

IN PRAYER ABOVE ALL - SEEK GOD

The Divine Services grant us an understanding of who God is, what the Church is; through them, we gain an experience of God, a theophany. For it is precisely in the Divine Services that the earthly and heavenly Churches are united. This is the time when we are filled with the holy divine life and transfigured. Therefore, we must also approach the Divine Services as a matter of great seriousness.

You know, when an important person is coming to visit, we always prepare as best we can. Consider how we behave when a priest comes—and even more so a

bishop—how we all bustle about him! This is necessary, of course, as it shows our respect for him, for his person, for the calling and mission that God has entrusted to him. But if we look carefully: do we “bustle” the same way before the Lord? Are we aware of Whom we stand before in prayer? Do we understand Who sees every second of our life and knows every thought?

We very often complain about our inattentiveness and distraction during prayer. This is something we allow ourselves because we are not truly conscious of Whom we are standing before. When we are before a bishop, we think of nothing else but who is before us and what we are saying. But when we are in prayer before God, it seems to us that we can let our thoughts wander, be distracted, or mechanically recite memorized prayers. The problem of our inattentiveness in prayer is that we forget to Whom we have come.

Why is it so important to be attentive especially during the Divine Liturgy? Because everything that takes place there awaits our personal response. Of course, this does not mean we must express everything emotionally or demonstratively. Rather, we must be aware of and understand what we are singing or responding to.

All the services of the Church lead us through the entire history of humanity’s salvation and point us to the experience and example of the saints—human beings who are now in the Kingdom of Heaven. The liturgical texts allow us to come to know many truths of the faith. They open to us, one might say, a catechism, the life of Jesus Christ. In our church texts, we read excerpts from Holy Scripture daily, sometimes teachings from the saints. Thus we draw from the Church’s treasury. And at times we draw so little, simply because we are inattentive.

To gain this experience, we must recognize that the place of our encounter with all the treasures the Church possesses is in the Divine Services. This is not merely the piety of certain individuals who shaped or framed some devotion. It is the tremendous lived experience of thousands who came before us. What we sing and pray was the cry of their souls—just as we have read many times about the cries of people who called out before Christ, begging Him to heal them. And so this experience was forged, I dare say, with the blood and

sweat of our forebears. There is no need to invent many new things, for the Church's liturgical tradition is so rich that we should begin simply by joining it and drawing from it.

To acquire the experience of God, let us begin with an examination of conscience: how much do we truly desire this encounter with God? How much do we want to do what Mary did—to sit constantly at Christ's feet? I really do not like when people compare Martha and Mary and harshly criticize Martha. If you know the Church's tradition, you will know that both are venerated as saints. In my view, Martha's mistake at that moment was simply in acting, as is typical of a woman's nature, with great concern because an important guest had come. This is not just a bishop—it is Jesus Christ Himself. And of course one should wish to serve Him in the best way possible. However, Martha was not concerned with what *He* wanted. In my view, Mary's merit was precisely this: she contemplated Christ and listened closely to what He had to say. That is why Christ praised her. I am convinced that later Mary was even more active and busy than Martha—but in accordance with the will of God, because she had first listened to what God wanted. Martha did not understand this, and that is why she was so irritated that Mary was sitting and doing nothing.

I recall an episode from the life of St. Anthony the Great, who lived in complete solitude for thirty-seven years. Just imagine—so many years in isolation. He came out into the world only twice during that time. The first was during the persecution of Christians, when he felt that God was calling him to come out and support them. He went to the city and ministered to the Christians. He had a great desire (yes, saints also have strong desires)—he wanted to die for Jesus Christ. For those early Christians, it was considered a great honor to bear witness to the faith with one's own blood. But the Lord said: “No. That is not your destiny, not your path, not your sanctity.” The pagans would have gladly martyred him, but when they looked at him—an old man—they thought, “What's the use?” and let him go. It was God's will. The second time he left the desert was when the Lord called him to combat the heresies that had arisen in the Church. St. Anthony listened to the voice of God and went to defend the Church against the influence of the Arian heresy.

Therefore, it is essential to emphasize: we must sit at the feet of Jesus Christ. Then Christ will teach you how to think rightly and how to treat others correctly. Let us sit at Christ's feet—and He will teach us everything. God always has answers for those who ask Him and is always waiting for you to be with Him.

PRAYER AS A PRIVILEGE TO BE WITH GOD

We often perceive prayer merely as a duty. Yet we should strive to understand that prayer and the glorification of the Lord are, in fact, a *privilege*. We must sincerely feel what most Christians, for some reason, still fail to realize: *"It is good for us to be here"*—to feel what the early Christians felt when they could not even gather freely due to persecution. Or consider the example of St. David, who cried out: *"My soul has thirsted for the living God. When shall I come and appear before the face of God?"* (Ps 41:2).

To feel this—truly—is to no longer require compulsion to pray. Consider the example of Moses, who had the privilege of being with God. After that encounter, he shone so brightly that others could not even look at him. Do we shine like that after our own privileged encounters with God in prayer?

We have become materialized, for we live and revolve within this material world. What, then, is the role of prayer? To spiritualize us. The quality of our prayer is evident in who we are *after* it. Prayers are like nourishment for the soul.

If we analyze how we pray, we will observe that beyond our daily prayers, we most often turn to God in times of need, distress, or when we seek help. We very rarely remember to come to the Lord with a prayer of thanksgiving or a prayer of praise.

Yet praising God is not for *His* benefit—it is for *ours*. For in glorifying the Lord, we recall who He is and what He has done for those who believed in Him. As a result, we ourselves grow in faith.

Let us learn to begin our prayer with praise—praising God for what He has done in the life of humanity, in the life of our people, and in our own lives. Let

us learn to bless God for His actions, for His continuing presence. And only then, with faith in His omnipotence, justice, and great love for us, may we approach Him with our petitions. Let us consider what is the greatest treasure we possess. Our life here on earth is our greatest value. And within that life—our *time* is most precious. Yet we often fail to realize that the time we dedicate to God is of utmost importance. We may even be tempted to think that time spent in communion with God—*that is, in prayer*—is somehow a waste. The reason for this may be that we do not fully grasp how vital it is to dwell with our Creator.

Our prayer transforms us. It fills us with insight into what we must do, how we ought to act, and how we are to build relationships with others. Our prayer—this very abiding with God—leaves an imprint on our entire life.

By reading the Holy Gospel, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the Catechism, we have come to learn many things about God—and this is truly important. Yet even more essential is not merely *knowing about* God, but *coming to know Him personally*. And this happens only through prayer.

The Holy Gospel, the writings of the Church Fathers, or the Catechism are all testimonies—others’ accounts about the Lord—their experiences of God passed on to us.

Prayer, however, is the place where *we ourselves* encounter God—where *we* gain personal experience of the Lord. If prayer holds a worthy place in our life, then we will indeed have this experience of God. But if we neglect prayer, then no matter how many books we read or how many theological lectures we hear, we will only *know about* God—we will not *know Him* personally.

PRAYER AS AN EXPERIENCE OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

In our earthly life, we clearly understand that to achieve anything worthwhile, we must work diligently. To gain knowledge, to build a house, to reach a certain professional level—effort is always required. Yet when it comes to spiritual life, we often assume that everything should come easily. We say a prayer in the morning and expect everything to be resolved at once.

We go to church, confess, receive Holy Communion—and presume all will instantly be made right.

But just as earthly accomplishments require labor, *spiritual progress* demands even *greater* effort than material achievements.

As the folk saying goes, “Prayer and labor will overcome all.” This means effort is necessary, and it is through prayer that the Lord sends us His aid. Certainly, God can change us in an instant—there is nothing impossible for Him—but we are not always ready for such a change. Thus, the path to the Kingdom of Heaven must be walked step by step, with perseverance.

Our Lord Jesus Christ told us that the Kingdom of Heaven is attained through striving. Therefore, let us labor—and it will be given to us.

When first discovering Christianity, one may get the impression that it calls us to abandon this earthly life entirely and focus only on God. That we should neglect our earthly duties—civil or marital—and become wholly absorbed with the Kingdom of Heaven. But that is not the case at all. From our own experience, we know that when we deepen our relationship with the Heavenly Father and are inwardly transformed, we begin to see changes in every area of our lives. That is why the Lord says: “Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven,” because where the Kingdom is, there is God. And when we find God, the Lord assures us: “All these things shall be added unto you!”—meaning, everything else will fall into place.

In God, we come to understand what is truly good for us: what to do, how to act, and how to build our relationships with others. By seeking God and His Kingdom, we will see how everything in life finds its proper order.

As St. John Chrysostom says, when Christ ascended into heaven, He took human nature with Him—making man worthy to dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God and remain with Him, and all will be given to us at the proper time. Let us be like the Gospel Mary at the feet of Christ—and we will hear His voice.

The Kingdom of Heaven is near; we need only “take hold of it with the hands of our faith.” Just as a mother cares for her children, so too does the Heavenly Father care for each of us. We must come before God as we are and be with Him, listening to what He speaks to us through our life. It is a beautiful thing to listen to God in silence. We so often wish to speak to Him—but we must learn rather to listen more, and to observe.

We must pray—and then we shall receive the Kingdom of Heaven. It is with all of us. And the more we pray and repent, the more the Kingdom of Heaven will be present among us.

We are often afraid to stop thinking about worldly things. Let us try instead to think more about heavenly things, about God. And we do this in prayer. We must remember the words Christ spoke to each of us: “You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.” Each one of us is a temple of God. The Lord dwells in every one of us. To each of us, He has given the Kingdom of Heaven. The person living next to me is someone who also carries the Holy Spirit within. This realization makes life simple and clear. One only needs to accept God’s words, to have a pure heart to live by them, and clean hands to receive them. When we feel God within us, we seek His Kingdom within, and we see it in every person near us.

Our great misfortune is that we so often place ourselves at the center—and everyone else around us. But in truth, *God* is at the center, and we are all around *Him*. The holiness of one person draws all of us closer to God. When someone possesses great virtue, that person is nearer to God. And through such a person, God reveals Himself to us. The Kingdom of God comes closer to us all.

IMITATING CHRIST

Every Christian is obliged to imitate Christ in a very particular way: by touching Him in prayer and taking upon oneself all the characteristics of His person—especially by becoming like Him in love for others. Then Christ, so to speak, becomes visible in the person. Just as Christ became the visible icon of the Father, so too do we become the icon of Christ, revealing our Savior to

the world—for the Lord says that by your deeds they will know whose children you are.

We must adhere to the tradition of the Holy Fathers, who teach: *“Save yourself, and thousands around you will be saved.”*

One theologian observes: *“A person who holds high offices and carries out important functions in the Church may be utterly poor in spirit. Conversely, the one who is ‘poor in God’ —a saint—has no need of holding any Church positions, for he radiates spiritual wealth, distributing grace upon grace, because he lives in holiness.”*

As we are transfigured and sanctified, we will become capable of helping and serving thousands around us. Then others, seeing us and our way of life, will begin to discover God for themselves—and thus, by our very lives, we can carry out the best mission: to “shine” before others and point them to the Lord through our holiness.

Just as a radioactive metal naturally emits radiation, so too does a person whose essence has been transfigured in God emit the presence of God. Every human being, consciously or not, yearns for God—for we are created in the image and likeness of God and are always seeking our Creator. You must respond with your very being to this deep desire, so that others may see in you someone who has truly fulfilled this longing in their life. St. John Paul II said that today the Church needs not so much teachers as *witnesses*. God needs His witnesses. And who can be a witness in court? The one who has seen, who has personally encountered something. Therefore, we can only truly be witnesses when we have gained our own experience of God in prayer. If we do not have this experience and yet preach about Him, then we are deceivers.

Our mission is to live in such a way that, when people look at us, they encounter a reflection of God’s glory—and that, through knowing us, they may come to perceive the image of God.

I recall the story of the silent preaching of St. Francis of Assisi. He once said to one of the friars: “Let us go into town today to preach.” They walked through the town, stopped here and there, visited a few places, and

eventually returned. The brother asked, “When will we begin preaching?” To which St. Francis replied, “What do you think we were doing the whole time?” The point is clear: we are never neutral. Either we are proclaiming Christ by our lives, or we are not.

There is also the story of a successful businessman—a banker—who, though raised in a devout family, abandoned his faith and embraced communism to advance his career in the former Yugoslavia. On one flight to India, he found himself seated next to Mother Teresa. She did not argue with him, present any logical proofs, or attempt to convince him. She simply said one thing before leaving the plane: “*You must know—God loves you very much.*”

That simple phrase, spoken at the right moment, transformed a hardened atheist into a fervent Catholic who now publicly witnesses to Christ whenever he can. Anyone could have said “God loves you,” but it would not have had the same effect. It was Mother Teresa, having herself gained a deep experience of God in prayer, who could say it in a way that allowed the power of God to pierce even the hardest of hearts. God is calling us to become *specialists* who cultivate authentic Christian spirituality within ourselves—so that we may become a *model* of what every human person is called to be. Just as we seek out a competent dentist when we need dental care, so too must we strive to become *good specialists* in the Christian life. People look for skilled professionals; therefore, we must become spiritually proficient experts who, for instance, when asked how to pray, can explain it clearly and thoroughly—not merely respond, “Pray the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary*.”

The Christian life is not about *knowing a lot*—it is about *living what you know*. That is why the Apostles, having believed and then lived what they professed, became effective proclaimers of the Gospel. Christianity is not just one religion among many—it is *life in Christ*. It is not a relationship where “God is there and I am here,” but a life lived *in God*, a life that reveals God to others.

In the early centuries of Christianity, when pagans encountered Christians, they were often *shocked*—shocked by how *different* Christians were. Let us recall that the biblical words for “holiness”—the Hebrew *qadosh* and the

Greek *hagios*—fundamentally mean “set apart,” “different,” distinct from this fallen world and its sin-stained condition after the fall.

So the question is: are people *shocked* when they encounter us? Are they struck by our Christ-like otherness? Do we stand apart from the world—not by pride or arrogance, but by sanctity, love, and living in God? That is the mark of a true Christian witness.

PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

Personal prayer can arise spontaneously from the movements of the heart, expressing the full range of feelings that stir within us. However, we may also use the prayers of the saints. One might ask: *Is it permissible to pray using someone else's words?* Yes, certainly. But for such a prayer to become truly our own, we must immerse ourselves fully in the spiritual experience out of which that prayer was born.

The saints did not *invent* prayers. Their prayers emerged from deep spiritual need. Therefore, we must enter into their experience by attentively reading and listening to their prayers—prayers composed from a profound knowledge of God and a life lived in Him. We should read these prayers, reflect on them, and become participants in the saints' spiritual journey and experiences.

However, this reflection—this consideration of the meaning and emotion behind the words—should not take place during prayer itself, but rather during our free moments. It is worthwhile to discern the intentions and feelings that stand behind each phrase.

If we approach the prayers of the saints in this manner, then when we stand before God and offer them, we will find ourselves spiritually enriched each time. Our closeness to God will grow. Over time, the words of the prayers will come alive for us—they will begin to transform our soul and our entire life.

These prayers arose from the saints' knowledge and personal encounter with God. They were not composed at a writing desk, but were forged in long spiritual battles. They were born from moments of praise, of anguish, of surrender... These experiences—and these prayers—*cost the saints dearly*.

We, by contrast, often utter these same words lightly and without thought. Yet just consider the opening of many prayers: “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*” In saying this, we declare that *everything* we do is to be done *in the name of God*. Let us strive, then, to make these words real. All our feelings, thoughts—indeed everything—must be directed toward God, not ourselves.

Yet how often do we act for our own benefit? We make plans, pursue them with energy, and ask God to bless them. But sometimes those plans are pointless—of no use to God, to others, or even to ourselves.

Thus, in prayer we draw close to God and come to know His will. But this happens through a posture of *reverence* before the Lord, not merely as petitioners approaching a master with an endless list of requests. Thanksgiving for all things and reverent awe (love and fear) before God—this is the foundation of true prayer.

We must also ask the saints for help, for they have already learned how to pray and have spoken these prayers before us. Therefore, certain key elements are essential in prayer: thanksgiving, reverence, sincerity before God, and supplication for the saints’ intercession.

We cannot immediately acquire all the feelings, thoughts, and experiences the saints had. This requires *time and patience*.

Learning to pray is like learning a language: at first it is unclear, but with time things become clearer. We gradually mature spiritually so as to understand the meaning and depth of the prayers. We must constantly *reflect* on what we are saying and interiorly *unite* ourselves to the words we affirm.

The prayers of the saints did not arise abstractly or theoretically.

They emerged from life itself—from *a life rooted in the Gospel*. If we desire to become like them, we must walk the same path—the path of fidelity to the Gospel. The saints became a “living Gospel,” an embodiment of the Holy Spirit.

And to this very calling is *each of us* invited.

HOW TO EXPERIENCE A MEETING WITH GOD

The human person seeks God. When we speak of Christianity, it is my deep conviction that the most important aspect is the Incarnation of God. Every person continues to seek God—and rightly so, for we are created in His image and likeness. Thus, each one naturally seeks his Creator.

In the context of various cultures, many different religions have developed, because each person sought God in his or her own way. But two thousand years ago, everything changed radically: God entered human history, revealed Himself to mankind, and became incarnate.

Christianity requires incarnation. The disciples of the apostles continued this mission. Christianity is powerful and eloquent when it is *lived*, when it is *embodied* in real life. At one time, it was customary in churches to read the lives of the saints, because they provided a tangible model for imitation. People gazed at these lives to learn how to live with holy integrity.

In Christianity, it is vital to witness a real example—a *glimpse of the Kingdom of God in someone's eyes*. One must *encounter God frequently*. And it is essential to remember that we can encounter the Lord in prayer. It is entirely possible that certain saints, though they may not have seen many good Christian examples around them, nonetheless *experienced a personal encounter with God*.

Consider the example of St. Mary of Egypt, who was unable to enter the church until she encountered the Lord—and this encounter transformed her life. Or the example of Saul (St. Paul), who met Christ on the road to Damascus and converted (cf. Acts 9:1-30). He went on to write more epistles than the apostles who had known Jesus personally.

It is of the utmost importance to seek encounters with God, to *experience* the Kingdom of God. Such encounters are what give rise to true conversion and salvation.

WHY IS IT HARD TO PRAY?

Christ is the foundation and source of our life, and He has the answers to everything. Yet we do not realize how entirely dependent we are on God,

because we have become accustomed to managing everything ourselves. That is how it seems to us.

We make plans and form intentions, but we do not draw from God what is truly good for us all, because we live with a materialistic mindset. We need to understand why it is hard for us to pray: it is because we have been materialistic from the very first days of our lives.

However, it is only from the Lord that we can draw both natural and supernatural life. St. Augustine said that *“my heart is restless until it rests in the Lord.”* We see people around us constantly chasing after one thing or another... We are all chasing someone or something, trying to attain something, investing our lives in some pursuit.

If we are not building on Christ, then disappointment will come again and again. A person, on their own, cannot bear fruit. God loves us, and because of that, He desires that we bear fruit. But this is only possible when we are in close relationship with God. Why are there often misunderstandings and conflicts among us? Because each person has their own wisdom, their own version of the truth.

But God is one, therefore the truth is one, and only God possesses the fullness of truth. We, on the other hand, usually look at situations only from one angle. Each one sees things differently. With time, we may even reverse our opinion. History is full of such examples. Our perspectives are often shaped by the books we read, the opinions of others, or the media. We often adamantly defend a thought we've heard and appropriated as our own. This is dangerous. Our way of acting is usually the result of the environment in which we were raised or the people with whom we had relationships.

When we begin to live a deeper spiritual life, we draw wisdom directly from God, for if we all lived with God, we would all receive the same experience, the same knowledge and wisdom—because God is the same and gives the same truth and wisdom to everyone. Yet we approach everything in a fragmented way, and so we are unable to view life, people, and things in a holistic way. We must pray and ask God to help us see everything in its fullness. For, as the Lord says, *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”* (cf. Mt. 5:8).

How many times have we looked at our own life from God's perspective? Being able to pause before Jesus and spend time in prayer has always been—and always will be—a challenge for us. It is something we will be learning for the rest of our lives. Who has Christ been for me—and who is He now? We will only understand this if we make time for prayer and stand in truth before God. Any other answer or solution will always be limited and subjective. Only standing in the truth enlightens us. Life slips through our fingers—we lose it, and it loses its taste.

There is a sense of unfulfillment, of having something left undone, something to remember, something to complete, of haste in relationships. Everything seems like it should have been done yesterday. There is a feeling of incompleteness, discouragement, even depression. A feeling of loneliness, a lack of connection.

We live in communities, yet remain lonely and rejected. We are afraid to admit it. We try forcefully to be with someone just to satisfy the hunger for our own importance. A lack of connection with God makes true relationships with others impossible.

Many people live outwardly, but are inwardly alone. We claim we can manage on our own—so we invest all our physical, emotional, and mental energy. But we cannot manage by ourselves. We cannot heal ourselves.

God does not force us to go with Him—He invites. The Lord respects our free will; He only calls us. He is not seeking Himself, but seeking me. He believes in each one of us, He places hope in each of us.

His strategy is to seek, out of love, those who are lost—those who appear to be living but are, in truth, the walking dead.

We now live in a time ruled by egocentrism. We must place God at the center of our lives.

And we do this most of all through prayer—when we set everything else aside and remain with God alone.

WHY DON' T WE PRAY?

Why is it that we still do not pray? Why is it so difficult for us to pray? Why do we sometimes not want to pray? At times, we forget about prayer or search for various excuses to avoid it.

When we look at our lives, we begin to understand that from our earliest childhood—from the moment of our birth—we were raised and taught how to live and manage in this world. Indeed, our parents took it upon themselves to teach us how to eat, walk, and speak. Then we went to school, where we were further raised and formed as individuals, gaining a great deal of knowledge. Afterwards, we continued our education or entered the workforce.

So we can rightly say that we have been sufficiently prepared to handle life in this world—each person in his or her own place.

However, when we reflect on this period of upbringing, formation, and education, we realize that it took place primarily on the bodily level. In other words, our physical side was formed. But we know that a person is not composed only of a body. A person consists of body, soul, and spirit.

We know much about the bodily aspect. Our soul refers to our emotions, intellect, and experiences. Meanwhile, our spiritual dimension is the place where we encounter the Lord—it is the image and likeness of God in us.

When we examine our lives, we see that this bodily, material aspect of ourselves is the one we develop most actively. But when it comes to the soul, it's more sporadic: from time to time we develop our intellect or manage our emotions to varying degrees.

However, if we consider the spiritual realm, we often find that we have remained children there. We may be fifty years old physically, fifteen or twenty emotionally or intellectually, yet only one or two years old spiritually—or remain at the level of preparation for First Holy Communion.

We often describe someone by saying:

- “He is a carnal (тіл е с н а) person,” meaning that bodily or material concerns dominate his life.
- “She is an emotional or soulful (душ е в н а) person,” meaning that

she is warm, kind, and pleasant in relationships.

- But when we say, “He is a spiritual (д у х о в н а) person,” we mean that the spiritual dimension in him is developed.

This means that the person’s spiritual dimension is developed.

So then, when we say that it is difficult for us to pray—why is that the case? It is because we are accustomed to living and acting within our bodily dimension. We feel comfortable there. From the very moment we wake up in the morning, we begin to function and work on a bodily level—we “manage ourselves,” so to speak.

As a result, the spiritual realm often remains underdeveloped. We are unfamiliar with our own spiritual dimension, and so we are unable and untrained to function within it.

This is the same as if someone were to ask us to speak in French. If I do not know the language, I simply cannot speak it.

Likewise, when we speak of the spiritual life of a person, we must understand that one cannot live spiritually if one has not developed the spiritual self.

This is precisely why prayer is difficult for us—because it demands the engagement of our spiritual dimension.

PRAYER AND LOVE FOR ENEMIES ¹

God likewise does not approve of sin, yet He continues to love the person. We, too, may lovingly correct our brother and admonish him face to face. We act rightly when we do not agree with falsehood, and we do well when we correct evil while acting in love, remembering Christ’s words: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). The **Three Degrees of Perfection** are as follows:

1. The First Degree

When we love more and more deeply, we begin to sin less and less. When

¹ [PRAYER AND LOVE FOR ENEMIES] ORIGINAL FORMAT COULD NOT KEPT, THIS DOES SECTION DOES REFLECT THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENT

we turn away from a sinful path, we become practicing Christians, we accept Christ's teaching, begin to believe in God, and love our neighbor. Yet we may still be under the influence of mortal sin—we are in a transitional state: we can still fall under mortal sin, but now we already belong to God. This is the first step of perfection. If someone speaks ill of us, it is merely that person's opinion—an opinion taken up by someone who has assumed for themselves the right to judge us. But judgment belongs to the Lord, not to man. God gives us the strength not to fall under another's sin. If someone is angry at me, whatever the reason for their anger, that is their own passion. One reason we fall under the influence of another's sin is original sin. We react immediately against someone who sins against us. That is why it is so important to remember that God always loves, regardless of how others treat us. In the future, there will be the judgment of God, but in this world, the Lord never stops loving us.

2. If a person grows in love and in the knowledge of God, they move to the second level of perfection—the state of venial (everyday) sin. Such a person very rarely falls into mortal sin. They still commit venial sins because they have not yet fully overcome their bad habits. But by doing good and praying without ceasing, they gradually overcome these inclinations to sin. When someone constantly practices the virtues, they reach the third stage of perfection—a state of minimal sin. From time to time, they may fall into a venial sin, but practically never into a mortal one. These minimal, small sins do not create a chasm in their relationship with God.

3. This third degree of perfection is also known as the narrow way.

The more a person strives in the spiritual life, the narrower their path becomes. It is very important to pay attention to our actions in life, because it is our actions that form our state of prayer. If we act in love, we unite with the Holy Spirit and become filled with virtues. Virtues are not only ethical and moral means of doing good to others—they are the path that leads us to God. The path of sin is called broad. But Christ calls us to walk the narrow way, to pass through the narrow gate (cf. Mt. 7:13-14). Many people

enter through the wide gate, those who live by their passions, but this path leads to destruction. Only the narrow path leads to eternal life, to a life in fullness even here on earth. Only the narrow path passes through the narrow gate.

What is the narrow path? It is the prayerful state of a person, when the person sins less and less. Figuratively speaking, it is the state when someone is already on the way to the third stage of perfection, when their actions are practically without sin. The Holy Spirit dwells and acts in the person. Their actions, words, thoughts, and problem-solving are all acts of love. They act in love. Their path is narrow because all their thoughts, actions, and words have been narrowed to one interior movement—love. It is precisely the narrow path that leads through the narrow gate, which leads to the third stage of perfection. The broad path cannot pass through the narrow gate.

At the third stage of perfection, the person has few sins—only minimal ones. Their spiritual state is such that they no longer struggle with their sins, because they hardly have any. Such a person only loves. To be without sin means to be without that which inwardly generates a sinful condition—to be unbound from the external, sinful, human, from anything that is used for one's own benefit or pleasure. Without sin, the person no longer has attachment to the world. Yet the mind and will still live. And desire always seeks fullness. Once, under the influence of sin, the will sought fullness through worldly attachments, but now, being without sin, it seeks fullness in God—and finds Him within, in the heart discovers the Kingdom of Heaven, the angels, the demons; in the soul uncovers the inner life. The external world no longer interests this person. Externally, they only love, and love does not generate thoughts. One indication that a person is still under the power of passion is that they experience distraction and various thoughts during prayer. Distractions come because sin still lives within us. Every sin contains a human attachment to something in the world for the sake of our own interest. When we break the hooks of these attachments, the passion is cast out from within.

As we rid ourselves of passions, we grow more and more in the virtue of love, and the passions leave us. When we gradually eliminate various thoughts during

prayer, we begin to live more and more in the Holy Spirit. Thoughts and distractions always lead a person to anxiety and worry about the past or the future; they bind the person to this sinful world. The passions that stir within us give rise to thoughts that prevent us from praying without distraction.

When we practice a life of virtue, then extraneous thoughts depart and disappear on their own. Progressing through the stages of perfection contributes to the formation of our interior life. When we reach the point at which we no longer struggle with external sin, but only with what emerges from within (with the roots of sin), we acquire wisdom and expand our knowledge of God. This is already the high, third degree of perfection. The highest level of perfection is practically unattainable, for only Jesus Christ was completely perfect.

The one who increasingly lives in the Holy Spirit preserves purity of heart, walks the narrow path, and draws near to the narrow gate—he becomes a Son of God. “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). Whoever builds their life upon the Holy Spirit becomes like the Lord God. Then a person draws the motives of their actions, words, and thoughts not from their humanity (from sin, passion, or intellect), but from the Holy Spirit. If a person has reached such perfection, they come to what Jesus accomplished on the cross. And Jesus died on the cross—He took upon Himself all the sins of humanity and gave them over to love as He died, never once falling into passion. When we reach the stage of life in the Holy Spirit, we die to our sin (fulfilling Christ’s command to die to sin and live for God), and we become persons filled with love, who draw their life’s direction, actions, and thoughts from the Holy Spirit.

Then, according to the words of the holy Apostle Paul, the world becomes crucified to us (cf. Gal 6:14), and we begin to reproduce in our own lives what Christ did for us—we become perfect, as the Father is. Each person comes to this gradually, in their own way. Therefore, our goal is to open ourselves ever more in prayer to the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER AND LABOR OVERCOME ALL

When we are in a state of grace and without sin, when our heart is full of reverence—“for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (cf. Lk 6:45)—then we desire to pray, and we utter words that are dear to our heart and meaningful to us. However, if we were to base our prayer life solely on our emotions and mood, then we would pray deeply and sincerely only from time to time, but would lack any lasting prayerful connection with God. This is a great temptation—to postpone prayer until we feel a living emotion toward God, and to consider our prayer insincere at other moments in life.

From experience, we all know that within our conscious and subconscious mind live many emotions, thoughts, and experiences that do not manifest themselves at every moment of life. Even if we deeply love someone, there are still times when we do not feel it—but we know that love remains within us. The same is true of our relationship with God: at times it is difficult to live by faith, hope, and love.

In such moments, we must be guided not by feelings, but by knowledge. We must believe that this faith, hope, or love is within us, even if we do not feel it; we must be aware that God always loves us, is always present in our lives, even when we do not sense Him.

When the drought comes—when it seems our prayer is insincere and we are only saying it out of habit—what should we do? Would it be appropriate to stop praying until the spirit of prayer returns? But how can we be certain when that time will come? Perhaps never? There is a great danger and temptation here—to be tempted by the desire for perfect prayer when we are still far from it. When such a moment comes, instead of ceasing to pray, it is important to make an act of faith and continue in prayer. Perhaps we might even say to the Lord: “I am discouraged. I can no longer pray as I once did, truly and from the heart. Receive, O Lord, this ‘speaking’ of mine and this emotionless, dry prayer, and help me.” Then, let us offer to God the quantity of prayer, if we cannot offer the quality.

Of course, it is better to say just two words—“Lord, have mercy”—consciously and with deep understanding, than to repeat them hundreds of times without thought. But we are often not yet prepared for such awareness.

“Quantitative” prayer means that it is important to preserve one’s prayer rule in times of dryness and despondency. To accept the reality that it may, for a time, be nothing more than the recitation of prayers. For the holy Fathers have said that the Holy Spirit is present where there is prayer. The Apostle Paul writes that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). When the time comes, the Holy Spirit will make His presence known and will fill our patient prayer with meaning and depth. When we stand before God in those moments of our lives when we experience despondency or a sense of abandonment by God, we must exercise the strength of our will to pray according to our faith—and not merely through our feelings. In such moments, we must pray with the faith that we possess within us; we must pray with our mind, even if our heart does not burn with emotion toward the Lord.

In these periods of spiritual dryness, when we pray only through our effort, what matters most is faithfulness and consistency. By the power of our will, without giving heed to our feelings, we place ourselves in the presence of God and turn to Him—because He is God, and we are His creatures. Whatever we may feel in that moment, He is our God, and we are His creation. He is our Creator and Lord. He alone is the One who can give fullness of life.

A PROBLEM IS AN OCCASION FOR A MIRACLE

We constantly have problems. Often we solve some, and others arise—one is resolved, and another appears. Moreover, we always carry the illusion that there will come a moment when there are no more problems, when there will be perfect peace.

However, reflecting on peace, I came to consider that the word “peace” in Ukrainian (*spokiy*) shares the same root as the word for “deceased” (*pokiynyk*). So, only the deceased have that true peace. As long as we live, we do not possess such peace, because we are always faced with some difficulty or problem.

But again—what are we to do with these problems? We probably aim to solve them in order to continue on peacefully and calmly, yet the problems keep coming, again and again. That is why I am deeply convinced that problems and

difficulties are given to us by God. You know the saying: “Until it thunders, a person won’ t cross themselves.” Until a hard, complicated situation arises, a person does not reflect or pause to think about their life. Let us look at how difficult life situations have changed us—how they changed our perspective, our convictions, or our approach. It is precisely at such times, when a difficult life situation arises, that we must remember: this is God entering our life.

And furthermore—all miracles began with a problem. Let us look at the pages of Sacred Scripture. In the Gospels, someone has a problem, and then the Lord enters into the story or situation and performs a miracle. In the same way, when we have a problem, it is a good opportunity for the Lord to work a miracle; when we have a problem, it is a good opportunity to turn to God in prayer, asking for help in that particular situation. For the more problematic we are, the more God can act; the more troubles we have, the more occasions God has to work in our lives.

Let us not be afraid of problems! Never be afraid of them—but in times of trouble, let us be even more open to God in prayer. Let us understand: the greater the problem, the greater the miracle, the greater the sign the Lord wishes to work in my life. The greater a sinner I am, the more the Lord can give in order to make me a great saint. We have the examples of the lives of St. Augustine and St. Mary of Egypt. God made great saints and righteous ones out of great sinners. From the problems revealed in Sacred Scripture, He worked great miracles. And so it is in our own lives: if we have problems or difficulties, it is a good opportunity for the Lord to do something great and wondrous.

WHEN PRAYER IS IN FIRST PLACE

Prayer is important for us in terms of understanding how we are to use our life. Unfortunately, we do not often reflect on our unique life; we do not consider that it has a beginning and an end—we imagine that we will live forever. Yet life is very short. That is why it is so important to be aware of how we are using it.

A day, a month, years pass—and in that flow, we must find time to be with God. Why? Because if we abide with Him, we invest our existence in the Lord. Then God enlightens our understanding—what we are to do and what is most important in our life.

It is a different matter when, here on earth, we do not find time to be with God; when we avoid personal prayer in the morning, are always in a rush, and in the evening are already exhausted and give ourselves to God in the form of a “squeezed lemon,” having poured ourselves into earthly affairs. We come to the Lord and have nothing left to offer Him.

And yet, each of us wants to dwell with God in eternity—and this, figuratively speaking, will last 24 hours a day. And if we have not learned to dwell with God, if we have not tasted Him, will we truly be interested in being with Him for eternity? This means we are not ready for eternity, not ready to dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven. Prayer is precisely the opportunity to meet God—to meet eternity. And when that encounter is real and genuine, so too will our life be. We will know what we are to do in our unique life. Prayer is essential for us to understand how to make use of our life. When we look at the example of the saints, we see that each of them was unique, because each came to know God, developed a personal relationship with Him, and fulfilled the mission of their life.

Each of us has a unique life mission. No one in the world—out of the billions who live, have lived, or will live—can fulfill my mission. Just as I cannot fulfill someone else's. Therefore, for me, time for prayer is never time lost. It is the time in which I come to understand how to create my unique life, whom to help, and in what way—uniquely. God has an answer and a solution for everything. He knows what to reveal to us. And when our relationship with the Lord is alive, then all of our life will come alive. When our prayer takes its rightful and authentic place, then everything in our life will fall into place.

To paraphrase St. Augustine: when prayer is in first place, everything else is in its proper place—in personal life, in work, in the parish. But when there is no time for prayer—chaos reigns. Of blessed memory, Patriarch Lubomyr Husar

often liked to repeat a well-known phrase: “Do everything as though it depended on you, and when you pray—remember that everything depends on the Lord.” In today’s world, when a person has the most modern technology—computer, phone—they must have access to the worldwide Internet. With that access, one can gather information, find answers, resolve issues, purchase items, and pay utility bills. It must be the same with the Lord. No matter how intelligent we are, no matter what knowledge or experience we possess, we are always limited—because our knowledge and experience come from the past. Yet every situation is new and unique. And only connection with the Lord gives us answers to many extraordinary questions. That is why we must always find time for prayer, for being with God. Then, like the saints, we will invest our life rightly and bear fruit.

PRAYER AS A UNIQUE ENCOUNTER

When it comes to each of our personal prayers, it does not matter whether the prayer is in church or private. What troubles us most is our inattentiveness, our lack of focus in prayer. We all complain about this. The problem is that we do not fully understand what prayer truly is.

Prayer is a unique encounter between two persons: myself, as a person, and the Lord. Neither of these persons can be forced into the encounter. We cannot force God to meet with us. Nor can God force us. We spend the entire day in busyness, and when we finally stop for 5 or 10 minutes, we expect the Lord to meet us. But where were we the whole day?

That is why it is so important to be aware that prayer is an encounter between me and the Lord. And when we speak of this encounter, we must understand that we cannot complain about God—for He is always present, but we forget about His presence.

Prayer is an encounter that reminds us of God’s constant presence. He is always and everywhere. We affirm this in the prayer “Heavenly King,” when we say the words: “who are everywhere present and fill all things.” God is omnipresent.

But the problem is that, living in a material world, we ourselves quickly become materialized. From morning to evening we live in this world—we have various obligations and tasks. And this forms us. But God is a different mode of existence. That is why it is not easy for us to encounter the Lord or to become aware of His presence.

So when we begin to pray, let us not rush to grab the prayer text or even to begin speaking in our own words—let us first become aware before Whom we are standing. Let us become aware that we need God's help, that without God we can do nothing—and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, in God we can do many things (cf. Phil 4:13). Let us also remember that we need God's help, that without Him we can do nothing, and that God is almighty and loving and always desires to help us.

PRAYER IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO KNOW GOD'S WILL

Prayer is something supremely important and precious in our life. But until we understand this for ourselves, no one will be able to convince us of it. Prayer is also an opportunity to encounter God. When we encounter Him, we come to know God's will; we come to know what is true good—for me personally and for others.

All of us, in one way or another, go through our lives: yesterday we lived a day, today we are living it, tomorrow we will live another. But the question is: how will we live this life? How will we use it? We value many things in our life, but we do not value this unique life for what it truly is. And so, in order to live our life as well as possible—to use it in the best way—we must find time for prayer.

It is in prayer that God reveals to us what true good is for us, what His will for us truly is, what is useful and what is not, what is important in our life to pursue, and what is not, what is worth investing time and effort into, and what is not. Let us consider: very often we pour effort and time into something, we say we have a certain goal, we pursue it, and we spend our life, our health, our energy, money, and much more. But then, when we obtain it, we realize that it was of no value to God or to others.

Thus, prayer gives us the opportunity to be with God, who enlightens our mind, giving clarity and understanding about what is truly good for us. Many of us have experienced this—and I myself have experienced it more than once—when, in prayer, God removed certain worries or burdens. In that moment of prayer, it was as if light entered your awareness, and God showed you what you should do, and what you should not.

Therefore, prayer is essential in order to discern what is truly good for us, for God, and for others—that is, to know God’ s will.

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WHAT KIND OF PRAYER DRAWS US NEAR TO GOD?

I believe the most important thing is whatever draws us closer to God. If we want to approach God, it is not primarily about what specific prayer we say. What matters most is using what brings us nearer to Him.

If you read the Psalter, reflect on it, and it brings you closer to God—that is good. If you read Sacred Scripture and meditate on it—that too is good. Therefore, it is important to seek out what makes you closer to God, what reveals Him to you. In some moments of life, it may be one thing; in others, something else.

Everyone finds something different that resonates with them, and throughout life, those tastes may change.

PRAYER AND OUR VOCATION

The mystery of the Christian vocation is unveiled to us in the parable of Martha and Mary (cf. Lk 10:38-42): Martha, who was burdened with much serving, and Mary, who chose the better part that would not be taken from her. But I am deeply convinced that afterward, Mary could have served even more than Martha. Why? Because at first, Martha served by doing what she thought was necessary. But Mary sat at the feet of Christ, listening to what God needed from her—what He wanted to tell her, what He wished to entrust to her, what she was called to do.

The Christian, figuratively speaking, “sells” everything they have and are in order to acquire the treasure, the priceless pearl, and to buy the field where the true riches—Christ—are found. Only then, having given up everything, does the person possess all things in God. Thus, the Lord does not call us first and foremost to some task or charism—for one’s activity should flow from contemplation, from gazing upon Christ. That is why the goal of Christian

life lies not merely in outward activity, no matter how noble, but primarily in inner closeness to God. Work, whatever it may be, is not the end goal of the Christian. Rather, it is the logical consequence of deep spiritual life.

For me, a vivid example is the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whom we often perceive as “social workers” engaged in extensive labor among the poor. But what we rarely know is that these sisters dedicate at least five hours a day to prayer. And this time in prayer gives them the strength to discern what God wants from them—because a Christian without prayer is incapable of effective active service. That is why I dare to say that God does not primarily desire that we serve Him with our actions, but that we be with Him. This is why the foundation of Christian life—whether more or less active—is always prayer, which enables us to be with God.

When we seek first the Kingdom of Heaven, everything else is added and resolved. God expects us to seek Him and to discern His will. This is the most important thing. When we seek God and His will, we begin to see where God wants to lead each of us toward salvation—where and at what time we ought to devote more time to prayer or to work. Sometimes, God may lead us to a life of prayer. Then we should set aside active work. At other times, He may call us to a task—and then we should not flee into solitude.

The life of a Christian must never become rigid. It must always be attentive to the needs of the Church and of society. But in order to be attentive, one must be in God.

THE LORD IS ALWAYS WAITING FOR US

I believe each of us has experienced this: when we arrived in a certain city, everything there felt foreign and unfamiliar—we did not know where to go or how to begin. But... at the same time, each of us has had another experience: when we came to a different city—though everything was again foreign and unfamiliar—there was someone waiting for us. That changed everything. We felt different in that place. It became familiar. We let go of our anxiety, fear, or uncertainty. The same happens in prayer.

We must always remember that in prayer, there is Someone who is always waiting for us. God is always waiting for us in prayer. Always and at all times—whether we are prepared to pray or not, whether it is very early or very late, whether or not we feel His presence. We might not feel Him at all, we might be going through some life difficulty—but still, God waits.

If we were always aware that God is the One who always waits for us, regardless of who we are, our entire attitude toward prayer would change. We would always be certain that there is Someone waiting for us. Just like in ordinary life—when we go to visit someone and we know they are expecting us, when we know we are needed, that someone believes in us—our outlook changes completely. The same is true with prayer.

In the parable of the prodigal son, it says the father ran to meet his son as soon as he saw him—which means he had been watching for him (cf. Lk 15:11-32). In the same way, God is always watching for us. He waits for us always—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

PRAYER AND MERCY

Our life—especially our mercy and love for enemies—reveals the state of our relationship with God. Life shows how merciful we are. Life is not merely a collection of circumstances; it is the place where God has placed us and where He desires that our actions reveal whose children we are. The power of Christianity lies in the fact that we preach with our lives. It is better to see once than to hear seven times. No matter how parents raise their children with words, the children will imitate their actions. We communicate far more through our behavior than through words.

We must give an example. People need not just those who speak, but those who witness. To practice mercy, it is not essential always to be *doing* something; it is more important to carry within our soul a constant spirit of prayer. Thus, prayer and mercy are intrinsically connected.

In the circumstances of life, we can discover what kind of mercy the Lord desires from us. It is a mistake to think we are neutral—we are always influencing others, either positively or negatively. Others, consciously or

unconsciously, are in need of people who will show them what it means to be a Christian.

Self-fulfillment outright contradicts mercy, because it places ourselves—our desires and needs—at the center. We are also often unaware of how various people, books, social media, or passions influence us. That is why it is essential to work on ourselves and on our relationship with God.

THE GREAT FAST. PRAYER, FASTING, ALMSGIVING

The time of the Great Fast is something extraordinary. It is a time when we strive to give the Lord a tenth of our life. The 40 days of the Great Fast represent a tenth of the year. During these 40 days, we try to be more with God, to reflect on our life. Each of us is aware that we are not living as we ought. Thus, the Mother Church gives us this Great Fast so that we may pause.

In the Great Fast, we focus on three essential things: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Prayer is what gives us the opportunity to be with God. Everyone prays in different ways, but the primary goal of prayer is an encounter with God. As the saying goes, “You become like those you associate with,” so when we meet God, we take on something divine—we are transformed and become different. Therefore, if a genuine encounter with God takes place in prayer, we cannot remain the same; we inevitably change. That is why the Church calls for deeper and more extended personal and communal prayer. The Church services also change—they become longer and more penitential in nature—so that a person may reflect on themselves and their life. Thus, the time of the Fast is a special time for prayer.

When we speak of fasting, we often associate it only with food restrictions. To some extent, this is true. We limit food in order to learn self-restraint. However, it is more important to look closely at ourselves and identify what we remain dependent on, because fasting serves the same function as prayer: prayer gives us the opportunity to be with God, and fasting removes the things that prevent us from being with Him—our attachments. Let us examine our lives: each of us has many dependencies.

In the story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians, the main character arrives in the land of the Lilliputians, where they tie him down by his hair with tiny strings, rendering him unable to move. Similarly, it may seem that we are not committing major sins, yet like Gulliver, we are bound by small things. Therefore, the time of the Fast is a time to unbind ourselves and to limit ourselves in this or that. Let us think: each of us is attached to something, and each of us needs a fast from something.

Lastly, there is almsgiving. Almsgiving gives us the opportunity to rid ourselves of certain things to which we are often attached. It allows us to step out of the paradigm of possessions. In general, almsgiving leads us into a different mode of existence. Especially in monastic life, there is the vow of poverty. Poverty does not simply mean being materially poor. Poverty means *“in God”*—that is, a person who abides in God. Therefore, when we give alms, we are ultimately giving away what prevents us from being with the Lord—what we possess and what possesses us.

St. John Chrysostom says that there are no rich or poor—only those to whom God has given, and those who are in need. Each of us has received something from God, and so each of us can give alms—whether through an act, with money, or with material goods. Sometimes we can offer alms through a kind word, by speaking with someone, by giving someone our attention. And when we cannot do so in deed or in word, we can still pray for that person.

Thus, during the time of the Great Fast, let us pay special attention to ourselves. Let us focus on our prayer, our fasting, and our almsgiving.

THE VERTICAL DIMENSION OF OUR EXISTENCE – ВЕРТИКАЛЬНИЙ ВИМІР НАШОГО БУТТЯ

Jesus Christ said two thousand years ago: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* (cf. Jn 14:6). Christ revealed not only the image of God but also the true image of man. Yet human beings tend to see themselves more as body than spirit. Each of us has a subjective perception. If we experience God in prayer, we gain that immediate experience—of what to do and when, and what not to do. The more attentively we guard our prayer life, the deeper our existence

with God becomes. Otherwise, we view the world through our own lenses—each person having their own.

Why do misunderstandings and conflicts often arise among us? Because everyone follows their own wisdom, their own version of truth.

But since God is one, truth is also one. Therefore, only God possesses the complete truth. We, in contrast, tend to see situations from just one side.

When we begin to live prayer more deeply, we draw directly from God's wisdom. For if we all lived with God, we would receive the same experience, the same knowledge and wisdom. After all, God is the same for all and grants the same truth and wisdom to all.

Scientific hypotheses often assume that intellect will lead to truth. Yet intellect can limit our vision. A person seeks to understand themselves with an imperfect mind. An imperfect human being desires to act perfectly. But when our relationship with God is weak, we inevitably create our own ideologies.

It is important to remember that every person is a gift from God to me; every person carries a mission for me. We should ask: *What is God trying to reveal to me through this person?* It is also essential to accept every circumstance of our life, for through each event, God is speaking something to us.

Let us seek to recognize: what is God saying to me through this? Let us come to see that the circumstances of our lives are exactly the place where God desires to meet us. This is the best place for our salvation and sanctification.

The believer is one who transfigures himself throughout his whole life. Therefore, let us seek time for prayer, for the Kingdom of Heaven—and everything else will be added unto us.

WE ARE CHANGED ONLY THROUGH GOD' S HELP

A person cannot reach God by their own efforts. One must be born from above. Very often, Church documents analyze various situations and then offer proposals about what should be done. However, after each new decision, nothing

really changes in the Church. This is not ecclesial—it is not the Church’s way.

The patristic understanding has always been, and remains, that when there is a problem in the Church, society should seek an answer by asking: *What is God telling us in this situation?* We must discern what God is calling us to, and what His will is. The modern mentality, however, tends to conclude: *Let us understand something and then we will implement it.* We constantly analyze—but this has little effect on our lives. For we seek solutions only with our minds, which possess limited information.

As Jesus Christ said to Nicodemus: “*You must be born from above*” (cf. Jn 3:7). Christ tells him: *You are of the flesh and think in a fleshly way. You come from your mother and cannot grasp a different level of life. But the one who is born of the Spirit thinks differently.*

Today, we often think the center of human life lies in one’s humanity—in the psychophysical sphere. We are children of this age. We have our programs: this year we plan one thing, next year another. One year is dedicated to priests, another to consecrated persons. We have become shaped by this mindset. People have become accustomed to it—like a goose that enters the water, shakes itself, and is immediately dry. Similarly, our pastoral projects do not touch people; they shake them off like water from feathers.

Today we are imitating the world, rather than the world imitating us. We want to have form; we want to “make history.” But God does the opposite: He enters into particular circumstances, into history, into form. Meanwhile, we construct our own “holy projects” and then pray to God to help us fulfill them. But we are called to live *in Christ*, not to build programs and projects—for this is paganism. We act as if we can do everything ourselves, plan it all. The Church becomes preoccupied with itself, rather than with Christ.

We often design a project that ends up unfulfilled. We make efforts, but nothing succeeds—and then we look for someone to blame. Time passes, and eventually we realize that the failure was guided by Providence. If everything went according to our own plans, the world would be the fruit of pride and arrogance.

PRAYER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

When we recite the prayer to the Holy Spirit, we ask: *“Come and dwell within us.”* The Holy Spirit gives being to all things, inspires us, and is always present within us. Without God and His help, we could accomplish nothing. And the Lord is ready to dwell in us and transform us with His great love.

Yet God cannot transform us by force; He cannot make us better if we do not desire it. Let us look at the lives of the saints—they thirsted for God, they sought Him, and they made efforts to be with Him. The Lord desires to transform us, to enlighten our hearts so that we might understand our difficult and unique life mission. But we must truly desire this—and then the Holy Spirit will change us.

PRAYER NOT ONLY FOR ONESELF

Praying for Others

Prayer is something unique, for in it a person may encounter God. Often when we speak of prayer, it is not only our personal encounter with God, but also our intercession for others. We are surrounded by many people: family, friends, acquaintances. At times, they experience various circumstances in life—pleasant or difficult, easy or burdensome. In such moments, we ask God for help with their needs.

This highlights an essential truth: how close these people truly are to us. Let us be honest—we do not pray for everyone and everything. In 99% of cases, we pray for people who are familiar or dear to us. Through such prayer, we express to God our gratitude for their presence in our lives and show that we wish to speak on their behalf.

Showing Love for Others

At the same time, a natural question may arise: how can we tell God anything—does He not already know all things? Indeed, God knows these people better than we do, as well as their circumstances, problems, and struggles. Are we supposed to tell God something He does not know? Of course not.

Then why do we pray? We pray for our relatives and loved ones because by doing so we show God that these persons are dear to us. We demonstrate that their situations matter to us and that we wish to affirm this with our heartfelt stance before God.

Entrusting Another Person to God

When we pray for someone, it is as though we are entrusting that person or situation to God. We say: "Lord, You know all things, but we hand this over to You, for You know best what to do with it." We may think we know what is best for that person, but by entrusting the matter and the individual to God, we acknowledge—as the saying goes— "God is above and sees far."

God knows best what that person truly needs. So when we once again come before God, let us fully surrender that person to Him in prayer. And let us be assured that God knows, better than we ever could, what is the true good and lasting benefit for that soul.

WHY DO WE PRAY FOR THE DEAD?

When we bring our petitions and supplications before God in prayer, what do we usually pray for? Often, to say "we are praying" becomes synonymous with "we are asking." We ask God for something. But frequently, in our prayers, we do not only ask for ourselves—we also intercede for others, for both the living and the dead.

When we pray for the living, it is easy to understand—we are asking God for something on their behalf: we see their difficulties, problems, or needs. The question arises, however, when we pray for the dead. After all, they already stand before God; they have lived their life from beginning to end and now face the Lord with what they have. During their lifetime, they accomplished many good deeds—much that was valuable, beneficial, and meaningful for God, for others, and perhaps even for us. But we also know that they committed faults and did wrong. All of this—both the good and the evil—now belongs to them.

At first glance, then, it may seem illogical to ask anything of God for them, to pray for the dead, since they now possess only what they earned in life. It

may appear that the only thing remaining to them is what they have done. But on deeper reflection, this is not entirely the case.

Let us consider why we pray for specific departed souls. It is because they are dear and important to us. By encountering them along our life's journey, we were shaped and influenced by them—and likewise, they were influenced by us. We cannot live without impacting one another. No one is isolated from the world; we are always in relation to others.

Therefore, when we pray for the departed, we are revealing before God that these persons are precious to us, that we in part owe who we are today to their influence. Our prayer for the dead is not simply telling God: "They now have only what they did; what they earned is theirs." Rather, we are saying: "Lord, their life continues." Their life lives on in us, because the good they did is now something we can carry on.

Thus, our prayer for the departed is, in a real sense, a profession and affirmation: "O God, before You, not only is their life precious, but it continues in us." What they once did lives on in our lives. The good they did—continues in each of us.

END OF CHAPTER I